

An Investigation of Personality Traits in Relation to Adolescent School Absenteeism

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We examined the Big Five personality traits of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, and Openness, as well as four narrower traits of Aggression, Optimism, Tough-Mindedness, and Work Drive in relation to absences from school for middle- and high-school students. Participants were 248 seventh grade students, 321 tenth grade students, and 282 twelfth grade students. Most of the Big Five absence correlations were significant in the expected direction at all 3 grade levels. While Aggression, Optimism, Work Drive were significantly related to absences, only Work Drive added incremental variance to the prediction of absences beyond the Big Five traits. Study results were generally similar across grade levels. Findings were discussed in terms of dispositional absenteeism, the generalizability of the Big Five trait model, and the utility of more narrowband traits. Implications were drawn for early identification of absence-prone students and the precedent role of personality variables in school absence research on the effects of other variables, programs, and interventions.

KEY WORDS: school absenteeism; personality traits; Big Five; narrow traits; Work Drive.

The purpose of this paper was to examine personality traits in relation to school absenteeism among adolescents. Absenteeism has been described as one of the major problems facing schools (Orr, 1996–1998), and one that appears to be on the rise (Iwamoto and Yoshida,

1997). It has been estimated that an average of 6% of students in public high schools are absent on a typical school day (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). School absences have been found to be related to a number of important outcomes, including subsequent school dropout (Howard and Anderson, 1978), pupil achievement (Monk and Ibrahim, 1984), IQ scores (Freeman, 1934), delinquency (Towberman, 1994), gang membership (Aiken *et al.*, 1993), educational aspirations (Crespo, 1984), and the school performance/attendance of one's own children (Bhatnagar and Sharma, 1992; Matumoto, 1994). In a related vein, previous school attendance has also been found to be positively related to the subsequent adulthood general intelligence and earning performance of former students (Ceci and Williams, 1997).

As might be expected, considerable work has been devoted to research identifying the antecedents and correlates of school absenteeism. To illustrate, adolescent school absenteeism has been linked to such diverse variables as socioeconomic disadvantage (Galloway *et al.*, 1985), teacher control and support (Moos and Moos, 1978), teacher interpersonal skills (Aspy *et al.*, 1984), academic press (Phillips, 1997), teen pregnancy (Stevenson *et al.*,

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1998), family activity levels (Hansen *et al.*, 1998), and affiliation problems with peers (Hirata and Sako, 1998–1999), substance abuse (Byrne and Mazanov, 1999), participation in school athletics (Whitley, 1999), cognitive style (Rayner and Riding, 1996), season of birth (Carroll, 1992), and self-reported alienation (Reid, 1984). Several studies have concluded that school absenteeism is a complex behavioral product that is triggered by multiple factors (Corville-Smith *et al.*, 1998; Reid, 1984).

Notwithstanding the extensive research on school absenteeism, there has been little systematic attention focused on the role of personality variables. It is important to understand what relationship there is, if any, between personality and school absenteeism, since personality precedes many situational or environmental variables which have been studied in relation to absenteeism, particularly those dealing with school, classroom environment, teacher characteristics, peer relations, employment, and participation in extracurricular and community-based activities and programs, to name a few. Knowledge about personality-absenteeism relations can help us understand the relative contributions of such situational/environmental variables in accounting for variance in school absenteeism as well as further inform the literature on adolescent personality and lifespan development.

Existing studies examining relations between personality traits and school absenteeism have suffered from one or more problems. First, most studies in this literature examine only a few personality traits, a state of affairs that parallels the situation in personality–job absenteeism research, for which Judge *et al.* (1997) observed “When specific traits have been selected for inclusion in absence research, it generally has been in a piecemeal fashion.” (p. 746). Studies linking school absenteeism and personality include work by Corville-Smith *et al.* (1998), who found a negative relationship between self-esteem and school absenteeism, and McShane *et al.* (2001), who reported a positive relationship between anxiety and school absenteeism.

In contrast, Lounsbury *et al.* (2003b) examined personality constructs representing what is the most widely currently accepted normal personality model—the Big Five—in relation to school absenteeism and found emotional stability to be negatively related to absenteeism. However, their study, as well as the McShane *et al.* and Corville-Smith *et al.* studies, did not address what some (e.g., Watson *et al.*, 1985) regard as one of the major threats to validity encountered in absenteeism research—a skewed distribution of the absence variable which represents “a violation of assumptions for probability distributions in statistical hypothesis testing” (*ibid.*). “Raw” or untransformed absence data, as used in all 3 school absenteeism studies cited above, are usually highly skewed, with

most students having no or a small number of absences and a few students having a great many absences. Such skewness also presents scaling problems. Questions arise about what extreme scores mean, regardless of whether an interval or “ordered-metric” scale (see Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) is assumed. If, for example, the total number of absences from school during an academic year is used to represent some theoretical construct such as “withdrawal,” “disengagement,” or “school refusal,” one cannot justify interpreting a score of, say, 80 as being substantially greater than a score of 40 when most scores in the data distribution are less than 10. Data skewness can also reduce statistical power and the magnitude of observed effects. There has been a fair amount of discussion and analysis of this topic in the cognate literature on job absenteeism (see Clegg, 1983; Hammer and Landau, 1981; Harrison and Hulin, 1989; Rasmussen, 1991; Watson *et al.*, 1985), with most recent practice involving the use of a natural log transformation of the absence data prior to statistical analysis (Judge *et al.*, 1997).

This study sought to rectify earlier problems in school absenteeism research by examining Big Five personality traits in relation to absenteeism. Furthermore, the current study’s absence measure was based on a natural log transformation of the absence scores to reduce skewness. Also, we assessed whether the criterion-related validity of the Big Five variables could be improved by inclusion of additional personality constructs. Our interest in this question arises from consideration of the recent “broad” versus “narrow” personality trait debate taking place in the personality measurement literature.

There is widespread support among personality researchers for the Big Five model as a unified framework for personality (De Raad, 2000; Digman, 1990, 1997; Wiggins and Trapnell, 1997). Empirical studies have verified in many different research settings and populations the factor structure and validity of the Big Five personality constructs of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Costa and McCrae, 1994; De Raad, 2000). Disagreement has recently arisen over whether the Big Five constructs are sufficient in validation research or whether narrower traits contribute incremental validity. Ones and Viswesvaran (1996) and Hogan and Roberts (1996) hold that broad, Big Five traits, are sufficient to predict complex criteria like job performance. In contrast, others claim that the use of narrower personality measures can increase criterion-related validity above that achieved by the Big Five constructs, even when the criteria are broad variables with multiple determinants like job performance or academic success (Ashton, 1998; Paunonen, 1998; Paunonen *et al.*, 1999; Schneider *et al.*, 1996). In many cases, the narrower personality traits were better criterion predictors than the

broader Big Five measures. In the present study, we sought to determine whether narrow traits might add to the incremental predictive validity of the Big Five personality traits when used to predict absences. There are many narrow personality traits which could be studied in this regard. We employed 2 criteria to select specific, narrow traits likely to add variance beyond the Big Five: (1) trait definition and content not readily represented in standard Big Five taxonomies (cf. De Raad, 2000; Digman, 1990; Johnson and Ostendorf, 1993); and (2) established, empirical relationships with some aspect of academic performance. While many traits meet these 2 criteria, we selected 4 that appeared conceptually distinct from one another: Aggression, Optimism, Tough-Mindedness, and Work Drive.

Aggression refers to an inclination to fight, attack, and physically assault another person. Feshbach (1984) found Aggression to be negatively related to academic performance for primary school students. Orpinas and Frankowski (2001) found a negative relationship between Aggression and self-reported grades for middle school students. Edwards (1977) found a negative correlation between Aggression and grades for high school students.

Optimism refers to a predisposition to have positive expectations about the future, including prospects and possibilities, and a tendency to put the "most at favorable construction upon actions and happenings, minimize adverse aspects conditions, and possibilities, or to anticipate the best possible outcome" (Merriam-Webster, 1981). Several studies have found positive correlations between Optimism and the academic performance of adolescents, including Chemers *et al.* (2001), Prola and Stern (1984), Robbins *et al.* (1992), and Stoecker (1999).

Tough-Mindedness refers to being unsentimental, matter-of-fact, objective, and unswayed by feelings when appraising information and making decisions. This trait is one of the 16 PF personality inventory scales (Cattell *et al.*, 1970) and is similar in meaning to the Thinking-Feeling dimension of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers and McCaulley, 1985). Mandryk and Schuerger (1974) found that Tough-Mindedness was negatively related to grades for high school students, while Barton *et al.* (1972) found a positive relationship between tough-mindedness and achievement scores in math and science for middle school students. Gillespie (1999) found that male high school students, who scored lower on the Thinking (versus Feeling) dimension of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, had higher mathematics achievement scores. Also, Oakland (1969) found that "being logical" was related to over-achievement in male high school students. It is not clear why the results are mixed concerning the relationship between tough-mindedness (and related traits) and academic performance, but validities may differ by grade level or by sex.

Work Drive was measured by an 11-item scale developed by Lounsbury, Gibson, and Hamrick (2003). Work drive is akin to concepts of academic ethic (Rau and Durand, 2000), Protestant ethic or work ethic (Mirels and Garrett, 1971) and work involvement (Kanungo, 1982). Lounsbury *et al.* (2003a) found Work Drive to be positively related to academic performance for college students.

Research Questions

Focusing on absenteeism from school for middle and high school students, this study addressed 4 research questions.

1. Do the Big Five personality traits of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, and Openness significantly predict absences?

On the basis of their conceptual specification and on extant research, we offer individual hypotheses for each of the Big Five traits:

- (1a) *Agreeableness will be negatively related to absences.* The rationale for this hypothesis is that more agreeable individuals are more likely to be cooperative, kind, helpful, and willing to engage in prosocial behavior (Graziano and Eisenberg, 1997). This behavior becomes more likely to occur when school attendance is regular and consistent. Also, more agreeable students have been found to have more positive relations with teachers and peers (Graziano *et al.*, 1997; Jensen-Campbell *et al.*, 1996).
- (1b) *Conscientiousness will be negatively related to absences.* Individuals higher on conscientiousness tend to be more rule-following, dependable, orderly, reliable, and structured (Hogan and Ones, 1997). Since school attendance is required by school rules and policies, students who score higher on Conscientiousness will, on the whole, be likely to have fewer absences than individuals lower on Conscientiousness.
- (1c) *Emotional Stability will be negatively related to absences.* Since this trait refers generally to adjustment and resilience, it is logical to expect that students who score higher on Emotional Stability will be better able to face the stress and strain associated with going to school and less likely to avoid strain or react impulsively by choosing to be absent

from school. Indeed, prior research supports this proposition (e.g., Kearney, 1993; McShane *et al.*, 2001; Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003b).

- (1d) *Extraversion will be negatively related to absences.* Individuals who are more introverted are more likely to engage in social withdrawal (cf., Washington and Alcorn, 1978; Blackburn, 1979), while those who are more extraverted tend to be more gregarious, talkative, sociable, outgoing, active, warmhearted, affiliative, and expressive (Watson and Clark, 1997). Socially oriented behaviors are more likely in structured social settings like a school environment than at home or in most other situations out of school. Along these lines, Herrmann *et al.* (1977) found that more extraverted young adults were more likely to remain in a military training academy.
- (1e) *Openness will be negatively related to absences.* Openness refers to receptivity to new learning, change, and novel experience (McCrae and Costa, 1997)—which are generally more likely to occur in the school environment than outside of it.
2. Do the narrow traits of Aggression, Optimism, Tough-Mindedness, and Work Drive significantly predict absences? On the basis of the trait conceptualizations given above, we advanced the following hypotheses for 3 of these traits, with no directional hypothesis advanced for Tough-Mindedness:
 - (2a) *Aggression will be positively related to absences.*
 - (2b) *Optimism will be negatively related to absences.*
 - (2c) *Work Drive will be negatively related to absences.*
3. Do the narrow traits add incremental validity in the prediction of absences beyond that of the Big Five traits?
4. Do the above relationships vary by grade level?

METHOD

Data for this study came from archives developed as part of a study of middle school and high school students conducted within a county school system. Data were used here with the permission of the Superintendent's office. The school system, located in the Southeastern

United States, comprised 98% Caucasian students and 2% African American students. Data were collected from 248 students in the 7th grade (middle school), 321 students in the 10th grade, and 282 students in the 12th grade (high school) as part of a longitudinal study by the school system.

Participants

Of the 248 students in the 7th grade, 53% were males and 47% females. The average age was 12.6 years. Of the 321 students in the 10th grade, 46% were males and 54% females. The average age being 15.4 years. Of the 282 students in the 12th grade, 48% were males and 52% females. The average age of this group was 17.8 years.

Measures

Broadband Personality Measures

Personality was measured with the *Adolescent Personal Style Inventory (APSI; Lounsbury et al., 2003b)*. The APSI has 120 items and incorporates measures of each of the Big Five traits of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability. Scales for each factor consist of 10–12 items each. All items in the APSI consist of declarative statements, and respondents are asked to express agreement or disagreement by selecting 1 of 5 labeled options (strongly disagree; disagree; neutral/undecided; agree; strongly agree).

Narrowband Personality Measures

The personality assessment also incorporated measures of four narrowband personality constructs.

Aggression was measured by a 5-item scale developed specifically for this study. Sample items included the statements “I will fight another person if that person makes me really mad” and “I sometimes feel like hitting other people.”

Optimism was measured by a 7-item scale adapted from an adult version of the scale (Lounsbury, Sundstrom, *et al.*, 2003). Sample items from this measure include, “When bad things happen, I still look on the bright side” and “I think I will have a very good life when I grow up.”

Tough-Mindedness was assessed by an 11-item scale adapted from an adult version of the same scale. Sample items include the following: “It bothers me to see an animal suffering” and “I never show my feelings to other people.” “It upsets me when my friends are unhappy.”

Table I. Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficient Alphas, and Intercorrelations of Study Variables for 7th Graders ($N = 248$)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Agreeableness	(0.84)	0.43**	0.36**	0.29**	0.38**	−0.69**	0.42**	−0.25**	0.44**	−0.09
2. Conscientiousness		(0.80)	0.22**	0.31**	0.46**	−0.26**	0.46**	−0.25**	0.66**	−0.16**
3. Emotional Stability			(0.82)	0.19**	0.17**	−0.34**	0.39**	0.22**	0.23**	−0.18**
4. Extraversion				(0.82)	0.54**	−0.27**	0.64**	−0.47**	0.39**	−0.18**
5. Openness					(0.84)	−0.37**	0.61**	−0.49**	0.61**	−0.31**
6. Aggression						(0.79)	−0.34**	0.32**	−0.39**	0.20**
7. Optimism							(0.81)	−0.33**	0.58**	−0.17**
8. Tough-Mindedness								(0.81)	−0.40**	0.11*
9. Work Drive									(0.88)	−0.32**
10. Absences ($\log_e$)										—
Mean	3.37	3.35	3.08	3.89	3.57	2.63	3.77	2.84	3.13	9.58
Standard deviation	0.65	0.67	0.76	0.61	0.63	0.92	0.65	0.73	0.71	7.16

Note. Values in the diagonal represent Cronbach's coefficient alpha reliability coefficient.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Work Drive was measured by an 11-item scale developed by Lounsbury *et al.* (2003c). Sample items include “I don’t mind staying up late to finish a school assignment,” “Doing well in school is the most important thing in my life,” and “Even if I won a million dollars, I would study hard to make good grades in school.”

Items in the above scales used a 5-point agree–disagree rating scale. Individual scores for traits were calculated only for individuals who responded to all items in the relevant scales.

Absences

The cumulative number of absences in a school year was recorded for each student. Raw absence scores were transformed to the natural log prior to using them in the analyses.

Procedure

We requested and received permission from the school system to use their archival data. These records consisted of students’ personality scores and grades. The school system released records of students’ personality data and grades after a school official matched individual data and replaced identifying information with special ID numbers, to create an anonymous dataset.

School counselors administered the APSI to students during class time, with all administration occurring on a single day in each school. In each test administration session, the counselor explained the school’s purposes in asking for data and distributed the APSI forms. We provided guidelines for group administration and provided direct supervision. Counselors collected the completed forms.

RESULTS

Tables I–III display means, standard deviations, and coefficient alphas for the 9 personality variables. The tables also show intercorrelations among the personality scales and their correlations with absences for the 7th, 10th, and 12th grade populations included in the study. The Big Five traits were significantly correlated with absences for all grade levels. With the exception of Agreeableness in the 7th grade sample and Extraversion in the 10th and 12th grade sample, these correlations ranged in magnitude from a low of $r = -0.13$ ($p < 0.05$) for the relationship between Conscientiousness and absenteeism in the 10th grade sample, to a high of $r = -0.31$ ($p < 0.01$) for Openness in the Grade 7 sample. With the exception of Tough-Mindedness in the 10th and 12th grades, all 4 of the narrowband personality traits were significantly correlated with absences. These relationships ranged in magnitude from a low of $r = 0.10$ ($p < 0.05$) for Tough-Mindedness in 7th grade sample), to a high of $r = -0.34$ ($p < 0.01$) for Work Drive in the 12th grade sample.

To examine the question of incremental validity in predicting GPA, we performed a series of hierarchical regression analyses in which the Big Five measures were entered as a predictor set. In the ensuing step the 4 narrow traits were entered in stepwise fashion. These analyses are summarized in Table IV. First, it should be noted that the multiple correlation for the set of Big Five traits was significant in all three samples: For the 7th grade sample, $R = 0.349$ ($p < 0.01$); for the 10th grade sample, $R = 0.251$ ($p < 0.01$); and for the 12th grade sample, $R = 0.351$ ($p < 0.01$).

Regarding the incremental validity of the narrowband traits, for all 3 grades, only the Work Drive variable added significantly to the prediction of absences: In the

Table II. Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficient Alphas, and Intercorrelations of Study Variables for 10th Graders ($N = 321$)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Agreeableness	(0.81)	0.32**	0.47**	0.46**	0.36*	-0.69**	0.41**	-0.39**	0.47**	-0.20**
2. Conscientiousness		(0.83)	0.07	0.33**	0.36**	-0.27**	0.43**	-0.36**	0.61**	-0.13*
3. Emotional Stability			(0.80)	0.21**	0.23**	-0.49**	0.37**	0.09	0.27**	-0.16**
4. Extraversion				(0.84)	0.40**	-0.38**	0.61**	-0.56**	0.44**	-0.09
5. Openness					(0.84)	-0.26**	0.40**	-0.24**	0.65**	-0.19**
6. Aggression						(0.82)	-0.34**	0.41**	-0.45**	0.25**
7. Optimism							(0.80)	-0.39**	0.51**	-0.10*
8. Tough-Mindedness								(0.83)	-0.46**	0.04
9. Work Drive									(0.87)	-0.26**
10. Absences ($\log_e$)										—
Mean	3.43	3.43	3.12	3.99	3.26	2.61	3.87	2.64	3.10	8.57
Standard deviation	0.63	0.67	0.71	0.61	0.65	0.89	0.59	0.79	0.70	7.67

Note. Values in the diagonal represent Cronbach's coefficient alpha reliability coefficient.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

7th grade sample, $R^2\Delta = 0.031$ ($p < 0.01$); in the 10th grade sample, $R^2\Delta = 0.018$ ($p < 0.05$); and in the 12th grade sample, $R^2\Delta = 0.038$ ($p < 0.01$). For all 3 grades, Aggression, Optimism, and Tough-Mindedness failed to add significantly to the prediction of absences once the Big Five traits and Work Drive were accounted for. In summary, the average amount of variance in absences accounted for by the Big Five Traits was 0.117 across the 3 grades and an average amount of significant incremental variance in absences accounted for by the narrowband traits (i.e., Work Drive) was 0.023.

To analyze whether the results for the first 2 research questions of this study varied by grade level, comparisons of common correlations were analyzed using a z test for the difference of independent correlation coefficients (Guilford and Fruchter, 1979). No significant differences were observed for common correlations between

grade levels. To analyze whether the amount of unique variance in absences accounted for by work drive above and beyond the Big Five traits differed by grade level, the standardized β weights were compared using a z test for the difference in 2 independent beta weights (Cohen and Cohen, 1983). No significant differences were observed, indicating that the amount of unique variance in absences accounted for by work drive was similar for the 3 grade levels.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide clear support for the proposition that the Big Five personality traits can predict absences from school for adolescents. As hypothesized, Openness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability

Table III. Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficient Alphas, and Intercorrelations of Study Variables for 12th Graders ($N = 282$)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Agreeableness	(0.80)	0.31**	0.40**	0.44**	0.31*	-0.65**	0.40**	-0.37**	0.45**	-0.24**
2. Conscientiousness		(0.84)	0.22**	0.23**	0.26**	-0.32**	0.33**	-0.12	0.61**	-0.16**
3. Emotional Stability			(0.81)	0.28**	0.20**	-0.44**	0.45**	0.10	0.26**	-0.23**
4. Extraversion				(0.86)	0.37**	-0.36**	0.59**	-0.47**	0.29**	0.09
5. Openness					(0.79)	-0.22**	0.40**	-0.16*	0.50**	-0.27**
6. Aggression						(0.82)	-0.36**	0.37**	-0.41**	0.20**
7. Optimism							(0.79)	-0.22**	0.38**	-0.21**
8. Tough-Mindedness								(0.83)	-0.24**	0.01
9. Work Drive									(0.87)	-0.34**
10. Absences ($\log_e$)										—
Mean	3.49	3.37	3.02	3.94	3.33	2.50	3.85	2.56	2.99	11.08
Standard deviation	0.59	0.65	0.67	0.56	0.56	0.86	0.56	0.72	0.66	9.48

Note. Values in the diagonal represent Cronbach's coefficient alpha reliability coefficient.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table IV. Results of Hierarchical Multiple Regression for Grades 7, 10, and 12 With Big Five Traits Entered Before Narrow Traits

Step	Dependent Variable: Absences			
	Variable	Multiple <i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ² change
Grade 7 (<i>n</i> = 248)				
1	Big Five traits (Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, Openness)	0.349**	0.121**	0.121**
2	Work Drive	0.390**	0.152*	0.031**
Grade 10 (<i>n</i> = 321)				
1	Big Five traits (Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, Openness)	0.251**	0.063**	0.063**
2	Work Drive	0.285**	0.081**	0.018*
Grade 12 (<i>n</i> = 282)				
1	Big Five traits (Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, Openness)	0.351**	0.123**	0.123**
2	Work Drive	0.401**	0.161**	0.038**

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01.

were negatively related to absences for all 3 grade levels, whereas Agreeableness was negatively related to absences for the 10th and 12th graders. Taken as a set, the Big Five Traits accounted for 12, 6, and 12% of the variance in absences at the 7th, 10th, and 12th grades, respectively. These findings can also be seen as extending the generalizability of the Big Five model, which has been verified across cultures and contexts and a wide range of research settings (cf., De Raad, 2000; Digman, 1990, 1997; Wiggins and Trapnell, 1997). Moreover, since the present samples ranged in age from 10 to 18, our findings also provide further support for the stability of the Big Five traits across lifespan (Costa and McCrae, 1994; McCrae and Costa, 1987; Rothbart *et al.*, 2000).

It is noteworthy that the current study found Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability predicted school absence because Judge *et al.* found that similar variables (i.e., Conscientiousness and Neuroticism) predicted job absences. Personnel researchers have long speculated about the existence of a dispositional tendency toward job absence. This dispositional tendency has commonly been labeled absence proneness. Possibly, adolescents evidencing proclivities for absenteeism from school mature into adults with a proclivity for absence from work. Moreover, personality factors may underlie both forms of institutional absence. The results of this study can be interpreted as supporting the relative efficacy of the broad Big Five traits in predicting absences, with some incremental improvement achievable by adding narrowband traits—in this case Work Drive—into the prediction model. The set of Big Five traits accounted for an average of 12% of the variance in absences across traits, with an average of 2%

of the variance in absences added by Work Drive. On the other hand, it should be noted that the magnitudes of the bivariate correlations between the personality traits and absences are relatively modest.

It should be noted that there are many other narrowband personality traits which might be investigated for links to absences. Firm conclusions regarding the broad versus narrowband issue must therefore await further research. However, these findings suggest that researchers who wish to study absences in terms of personality variables would be well advised to start with the Big Five traits.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, we were not able to measure other variables which might have served as control variables (e.g., personal health of the student, socio-economic status, family functioning, etc.). Also, this study was limited to a single geographic locale. The sample generally lacked ethnic diversity. We also were not able to identify reasons for absence. The school system did not record this kind of information. Potentially, the predictability of personality traits might vary for different kinds of absences (e.g., “excused” versus “unexcused” absences).

Implications

One implication of this study could be the potential for profiling absence-prone students. For example,

assessment of the Big Five personality traits might enable counselors or school psychologists to predict which students are more likely to incur frequent school absences. This information could help them better plan and respond proactively. Also, it may be possible to tailor absenteeism interventions to particular personality profiles. By way of illustration, for individuals low on conscientiousness, teachers or counselors could try to provide more opportunities for unstructured play or they could try to explain to the student how school attendance is important to retain flexibility to do what one wants away from school, free from the restrictions of detentions and suspensions, etc.

A second implication of this study is that it provides a benchmark against which the effects of other absence-related variables and programs can be assessed. As noted in the Introduction, since personality precedes most variables of interest to absence researchers, future studies involving such attributes associated with, say, school, classroom, teacher, neighborhood, or community, studies involving such variables should examine how they are related to school absences after personality traits have been accounted for. As matters stand, it is an open question whether any situational or environmental effect contributes any significant variance in absence prediction beyond the variance explained by the Big Five traits.

It could be argued that direct intervention in the form of trying to raise (or lower) a person's personality trait level is pointless. It is well known that personality traits exhibit high levels of stability and continuity (cf., Caspi, 1998). For example, Judge *et al.* concluded that the "considerable stability and possible genetic origins of these traits. . . make it unlikely that organizations can control absenteeism by changing these traits." (*ibid.*, p. 754). However, we are currently involved in a longitudinal investigation involving the 7th and 10th graders in this study and have found that the median 1-year stability coefficient for the Big Five traits is only $r = 0.549$, representing only 30% shared variance. This situation suggests substantial change in the relative rank-ordering of individuals over the course of a year, and it is hardly indicative of immutable personality characteristics. Over longer periods of time, we would expect even lower stability coefficients. Hence, there might be ample opportunity for deliberate personality change and modification efforts.

CONCLUSION

Our findings indicate that student absences can be predicted from the Big Five personality traits, with Openness, Emotional Stability, and Conscientiousness being consistently related to absenteeism for all 3 grades and

Agreeableness being related to absences for the 10th and 12th grades. The Big Five model should prove to be a useful framework for future research on the dispositional basis of student absenteeism. Work Drive also adds some incremental validity to the prediction of absences and should be further researched as it is also a good predictor of student grades (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003a,b). It will be interesting to examine whether future research can identify situational or programmatic effects on student absenteeism above and beyond the effects of personality.

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